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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KINGSTON 000623

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CAR (BENT) AND PRM/ECA (IRIS)
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SUBJECT: GOJ, IOM, AND UNHCR AGREE MOST HAITIAN MIGRANTS
ARE ECONOMIC MIGRANTS, AS 58 MORE LAND IN JAMAICA

REF: 04 KINGSTON 02193

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Mark J. Powell. Reasons 1.5(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (SBU) Just after dawn on March 4, a boatload of 58 Haitians arrived in Long Bay, Portland, raising the total of Haitian migrants in Jamaica to 496. During a week which began with the one-year anniversary of former President Aristide's resignation and departure from Haiti, the GOJ continues to wrestle with its migrant problem. In a renewed influx preceding the March 4 arrivals, some 159 Haitians landed in Jamaica between February 8 and February 19. GOJ, IOM and UNHCR officials with whom we have spoken agree that most of the migrants have come in search of economic opportunities, although UNHCR faults the GOJ's handling of some asylum request cases. For its part, the Ministry of National Security sees quick repatriation of economic migrants to discourage additional Haitians from making the dangerous trip to Jamaica. End Summary.

2. (SBU) At approximately 0630 local on March 4, a boatload of 58 Haitians arrived in Long Bay, Portland, raising the total number of Haitian migrants in Jamaica to 496. The period February 8 to February 19 saw an influx of five separate groups of Haitian migrants who arrived in Jamaica by sea. Six arrived on 2/8; seven on 2/11; 31 on 2/13; 58 on 2/16 and 57 on 2/19. GOJ Inter-agency Haitian Migrants Coordinator Paul Saunders told Pol/Econ Chief on March 2 that Jamaica hosts 332 at the former Jamaica Defense Force (JDF) base at Montepelier, St. James, and 116 at the Winifred Rest Home in Portland. (Note: This conversation took place two days before a boatload of 58 more Haitians arrived in Portland. End note.) A Haitian boy was born in one of the camps on February 26, and a Haitian male residing at Montpelier camp who had been working in a local garage as a mechanic, was murdered along with his Jamaican boss by Jamaican gunmen at the garage on February 22. Saunders said that while the Jamaican victim may have been a disreputable character who had a falling out with the gunmen, the Haitian victim seems to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

3. (C) Saunders readily characterized most of the Haitians as economic migrants, noting that one man who had been voluntarily repatriated to Haiti in late 2004 has now returned (by boat) to Jamaica with his wife and six children. Saunders said he happened to be in Portland on February 16 when 58 Haitians arrived, and had noted that some of the Haitians came ashore bearing French/English dictionaries, pots and pans, and other amenities that suggested that "they did not flee in the middle of the night." In order to discourage economic migrants from Haiti, said Saunders, the GOJ should quickly process asylum cases and return to Haiti any migrants who did not qualify "within 24 or 48 hours." The Coordinator expressed frustration at the conduct of a number of the migrants who have intentionally damaged toilets, broken light bulbs and who fight among themselves. Saunders acknowledged that such misbehavior could in part be attributed to migrants' boredom due to a lack of structured activities in the camps, but he complained that migrants are comfortable enough to complain (unreasonably, he implied) about GOJ-provided clothing and food, which he added meets or exceeds UNHCR minimum standards. He also admitted that the GOJ has turned a blind eye on the employment issue, allowing Haitians to work in the communities near the camp.

4. (SBU) According to Saunders, the GOJ has sufficient resources to accommodate the Haitians thanks to UNHCR funding which expires on March 31, but he worried that additional arrivals could change this equation. Saunders added that the GOJ has written to UNHCR/Geneva to request a funding extension through June. The Migrant Coordinator said he has been asked to remain in that position until June before returning to his senior position with the GOJ's Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM). He said that MNS Permanent Secretary Gil Scott would like for all appeals to be heard, and all migrants who do not qualify for asylum repatriated by June.

15. (C) Asked to describe the process by which migrants are considered for asylum, Saunders said that Jamaican immigration officers conduct initial interviews, then pass cases on to the GOJ's Eligibility Committee, which consists of representatives from the Ministry of National Security (MNS), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade (MFAFT), and the Attorney General's office. The Eligibility Committee either approves or denies a petition for asylum, and those refused can appeal the decision to a Tribunal consisting of a retired judge and two retired ambassadors.

16. (SBU) IOM Chief of Mission Nidia Casati told poloff on February 28 that there were differing views between and within the MFAFT and MNS as to how to handle the migrants. Senior MFAFT officials want the GOJ to be seen as helping the poor migrants⁸, she said, while others within the MFAFT and MNS would like to have them expeditiously repatriated. Many migrants are working on the local economy without proper work permits or other legal documentation and come and go at will as the curfew is not enforced. Casati noted that many of the migrants allegedly take their US\$50 repatriation grant and pay smugglers to return them to Jamaica. They then work on the local economy but do not put the money back into it as everything is provided for them at the camp.

17. (SBU) Casati went on to state that UNHCR expects to cease funding at the end of March and that perhaps this would be the encouragement the GOJ needs to repatriate the Haitians. Most of the violence within the camps, she said, is between the Haitians and for the most part does not involve Jamaicans. Over the past several months there have not been any reports of guard abuse, as was the case in 2004 in which a Jamaica Constabulary Force officer assigned to guard duty at Montpelier allegedly molested a teenage Haitian boy. Casati described most of the Haitians as economic migrants and stated that several of them readily admit that they are earning a better living in Jamaica than in Haiti. With regard to the repatriation process, she said that it is extremely slow and unnecessarily so. She complained that the retired officials on the GOJ Eligibility Committee panel take their time processing the cases because there is no pressure to move the cases along.

18. (SBU) Sandrine Desamours, a Santo Domingo-based UNHCR legal officer, arrived in Kingston on March 2 for a weeks-long review of the migrant situation. In a March 3 meeting with Jamaican honorary UNHCR liaison Clover Graham and P/E Chief, Desamours and Graham largely concurred with Saunders' contention that nearly all of the Haitians are economic migrants. Desamours did, however, express concern with the GOJ's handling of some of the asylum cases. She said that in some instances, members of the Eligibility Committee had noted applicants' accounts of politically motivated threats, and/or murders of close relatives, then dismissed the applicants as economic migrants without explaining how they determined that the threats were baseless. Desamours said that she would follow up with the GOJ regarding these cases. Neither Desamours nor Graham thought that UNHCR was likely to agree to extend funding for Jamaica from March 31 until June, although they added that Geneva would have to make that decision.

Comment

19. (C) As the one-year anniversary of Aristide's resignation and departure from Haiti passed earlier this week, the GOJ continues to wrestle with a Haitian migrant problem. The GOJ, IOM and UNHCR agree that most of the Haitians are economic migrants rather than political refugees. Caught between its desire to "do the right thing" and the realization that most of the Haitians seek economic opportunity, some in the GOJ see expeditious repatriation of those not qualifying for asylum as the best course. The latest arrivals may well prompt the GOJ to adopt such a policy.
ROBINSON